

## A MOTHER'S LONG WALK FOR JUSTICE

story and photos by judy a. pasimio

*"Pasalubong ha?"* said Alvin John, 4 years old, to his mother, Marylou. *Pasalubong* is a gift one usually brings home from a trip.

This was Marylou's latest conversation with her only son, when she called home, with the help of Saligan, the law group assisting her. *"Namingaw na mi."* I miss home. "I want to go home now," said teary-eyed Marylou.

This scene was a far cry from the one that was happening outside the makeshift sleeping area where we were having this conversation. The agitated, militant voices of the other farmers, like Marylou, were saying outside in front of a crowd, "We will not go home until our demands are met!"

We were in front of the building of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), where Marylou and the others have been staying for a couple of weeks already. "I want to



go home now, and be with my baby. He's just 4 years old, and he's alone, with my mother, but I can't. The reason I walked from home all the way to Manila was for Alvin John. So, I can't go back home now empty handed. *Wala akong maipapasalubong sa kanya. (I have nothing to bring home as pasalubong)"*

Marylou Sugalay, 26 years old, walked all the way from their home in San Vicente, Sumilao, Bukidnon to Manila. She has been walking for months, and has walked well over 1,700 kilometers. She reached Manila in Nov. 27. But she is not yet done walking.

### Marylou vs. Porky Pig

Marylou is one of the 54 farmers who started their walk on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October from their hometown of Barangay San Vicente, Sumilao, Bukidnon. The walk is dubbed "Walk for Land, Walk for Justice."

In the hills of Bukidnon, there is a fertile valley lying between Palapao Mountains, where their Higaonon ancestors lived. However, instead of them Higaonon people cultivating their land, growing food and nurturing life, pigs are enjoying nature's blessings. Yes, pigs.

In the 144 hectares of land being claimed by the Sumilao farmers, a multi-billion peso state-of-the-art piggery is being built. The San Miguel Foods Inc. (SMFI), a subsidiary of San Miguel Corporation, through its sister company Monterey Livestock Farm, is putting up 162 buildings to house 4,400 female pigs and 44,000 piglets.

How did this happen? How did the mother pigs able to get priority to breed their piglets in Sumilao fertile lands, than Marylou's mother, or Marylou herself to grow food for their children?

In 1990, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) placed the 144-hectare estate owned by the Quisumbing family under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). Five years later, the estate is awarded to the Higaonon farmers. DAR issued the Certificates of Land Ownership Award (CLOAs) to 137 farmers.

However, in 1996, the Office of the President (then Fidel Ramos) issued an order allowing the conversion of the property from purely agricultural to agro-industrial use. In 1997, fifteen farmers started a 28-hunger strike in front of the national office of DAR, to protest this conversion. Marylou's mother was one of them. This pushed the President Ramos to have a "win-win" solution and limited the conversion to the 44 hectares and approved 100 hectares for distribution to the farmers.

But the Supreme Court in April 1999, decided with finality to uphold the conversion, and effectively invalidated the CLOA issued to the farmers. In December of the same year, Robin Lesson, one of the farmers in the 1997 hunger strike, committed suicide in protest over the decision of the Supreme Court.

Several years after, the Sumilao farmers are back in Manila. They claim that over the years, the development plan which Quisumbing submitted, a requirement for the land conversion, has not been realized. The land has remained idle. Later on, Quisumbing sold the land to San Miguel Foods Incorporation (SMFI). SMFI then began to construct the modern piggery. This was not part of the submitted development plan, and one which was way beyond the timeline for development, as prescribed by law.

So, Marylou walked, along with her husband, her 3 sisters and 1 brother; along with her cousins, who are with their own families too, to call for DAR to issue a cease-and-desist order to SMFI from its construction of the piggery. Furthermore, they are calling for the nullification of the reversal of the conversion of their land, and to return the 144 hectares to them.

According to the SMFI, the investment in Sumilao is estimated to reach P2.4 billion. It further said that this was far greater than any projected future value of this fertile land. "But this means nothing for us," says Marylou. "No, not to us Higaonon, especially us, women. One of my friends who tried to ask for a job there, she was told that they needed someone with education. We don't have that. And besides, what can we do there? We heard that everything is done by machines. Even the feeding of the pigs! We need our lands. That's what will make us survive, that's what will make us live."

Marylou recalled her home, "We have a river, called Kulaman. It was very clear, and you would easily see fish swimming. But that was before the pigs came. Now, it's all murky as their waste goes flowing directly into Kulaman."

## **STREET LIFE**

Marylou removed her slippers and stretched her legs, rubbing her aching feet. She was on her fourth pair of rubber slippers. The walk passed through 13 provinces of Mindanao, then Visayas, and Luzon. In Manila, they walk from one government agency to another, to have their voices heard.



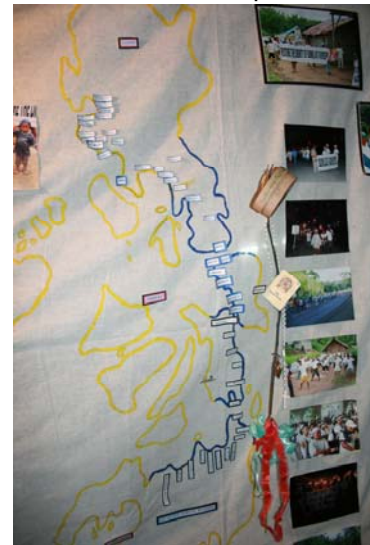
"In the provinces, we usually walked 60 kilometers a day. Then sleep for something like 2 hours. Then walk again."

This walk brought a lot of "firsts" for Marylou. This was the first time she encountered a typhoon. "We were in Gumaca, Quezon, when the heavy rain and strong winds came. We were at first laughing when we heard that a typhoon was coming. We said then the wind will

blow us straight to Manila!" But the typhoon made their walk more difficult and delayed them. "It was really hard – walking into mud, through the floods, the rain bearing its weight on us." She realizes how lucky they were back home in Sumilao, as they never experienced typhoons. "We live in a valley, so the mountains around protect us from bad weather."

This was her first time to see the different provinces of Mindanao, of Visayas and of Luzon. This was her first time in Manila. In Manila, she and the rest have occupied a space in front of the DAR building to wait for a favorable decision from DAR Secretary Naser Pangandaman.

From scraps of plywood and tarpaulins, they set up a sleeping area and a kitchen. "We are allowed to use the toilets of the DAR building between 5-6 am only. We have to register with the guards, and they keep time of how long we are in there. Before and beyond this hour, we cannot use the toilets inside the building. We find corners. As for bathing, there's a small area in front of the sleeping area, where there's a hose. Three women share a bucket of water. The water supply comes from the DAR building. It's low and erratic, and is dependent on the good will of the DAR staff in charge." The DAR building is right in front of a wide busy road, with a lot of jeepney stops.



The map of Walk for Land, Walk for Justice.

This was her first time to be so far away from home, away from Alvin John. "The walk was so difficult. But the hardest part is to be away from my child. Over the phone, he was crying. I was crying too. My mother said that they have nothing to eat there anymore. My husband and I are the ones who work for food. And now, both of us are here. Here, each time food will be donated to us by supporters, I always wish I can just send him my portion of food."



From their broken slippers, they made a *parol* (a traditional Christmas star lantern). But Marylou hopes that they won't spend Christmas in Manila. "I want to be with my son."

Meanwhile, she tries to overcome her loneliness and anxiety. She draws strength from the other 15 women who are with her, who she knows that are also suffering the same way she does, anxious to go home, but determined to stay. "Secretary Pangamdaman said earlier that he will give his decision in three days. I cannot count the days anymore, but I know that it is more than three days, and there's nothing from him." Pangamdaman said last week that he was giving the contending parties three days to submit their position papers and then will give his decision. No word yet has come from his office, but the sense from the streets is that he is favoring the pigs over the Higaonons.



**Rosita**, has 7 children, won't go home until the DAR decides in their favor.

On Monday, Marylou and her fellow farmers will be on their feet again to walk to Malacanang Office, for the second time. This time, they hope that President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo will face them, so they can deliver their message personally – that they walked for their land, and for justice.

This was, indeed, the longest walk of Marylou's life. And we hope that this is not for naught. One of the posters on their plywood wall said "How can she stand her ground, if she doesn't have any?"

The word "SUMILAO" comes from a Binukid phrase "Kon Sumilaw Da", which means, "when lights come again". Let there be light again in the valley of San Vicente, Sumilao. I hope that when Marylou goes home to Sumilao, she will have their land, and justice, as *pasalubong* for Alvin John.

Otherwise, this whole country is going to the pigs.

**Note:**

***If you want to sign on the petition for the Sumilao farmers, and for more updates, please log on to - <http://sumilaomarch.multiply.com/>***

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